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"The Scholarly Tradition."

From

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VISITORS' ADDRESS

GIVEN IN THE

Unitarian Home Missionary College,

VICTORIA PARK, MANCHESTER,

On TUESDAY, JULY 3rd, 1923,

BY

Rev. W. G. TARRANT, B.A.

Reprinted from THE INQUIRER, August 4th, 1923.

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THE SCHOLARLY TRADITION.

REV. W. G. TARRANT, B.A.

SINCE undertaking to speak to you to-day on 'The Scholarly Tradition' in the ministry, I have asked myself whether it can be necessary to lay emphasis on such a subject here and now. Are we not actually engaged in summing up the results of many weeks and months in which students preparing for the ministry have been pursuing severe intellectual exercises—faithfully, intelligently, and fruitfully pursuing them—under the direction of tutors rich in learning and experience? And is there not behind us as we meet at the close of another Session of the College life a long vista of almost seventy years, during which successive generations of students, led by an honoured train of able and devoted men, have been building up this very thing—the tradition and expectancy of a high degree of culture which the ministry, as we view it, should exhibit? All this is undeniable; therefore the plea which I beg to submit has nothing novel about it, and my only excuse is that things taken for granted are sometimes apt to lose their significance, in the absence of renewed attention.

I.

The Indictment.

Be that as it may, there are many among us, I am sure, who share with me the conviction that if our people, the Unitarian ministry and laity, give up scholarship their cause is as good as lost; and I believe there are not a few who, like myself, perceive serious dangers in the present situation. I am not now alluding merely to the diminished numbers of those who are willing—and competent—to undergo the discipline of exacting studies continued through a full and adequate College course; there may be special and temporary reasons for this falling off, and, anyhow, by itself it need not be very disquieting. But I seem to trace a certain ominous change in popular feeling as regards the pulpit, a change perhaps to some extent justified by uncomfortable experiences in

the past. While the Colleges have striven to maintain the ideal of "a learned ministry," congregations have sometimes felt, and even expressed, considerable doubt as to the real fitness of the finished article as it has stood at last in the pulpit. It is, indeed, an old charge against our preaching that it is, too frequently, dry, cold, over the heads of the people, and pre-occupied with minute points of argument and criticism that have no apparent bearing on daily life; all is summed up, in fact, in the remark that the congregation is apt to get "an essay instead of a sermon." Now if such criticisms represented merely a disposition of lazy levity in his hearers the preacher might well afford to discount them liberally; it is to be feared, however, that there is but too much ground for them in the mind of the judicious. The result is that Colleges and their high ideals of learning are blamed for sparsely attended services, and people are half-inclined to seek a desperate remedy and appoint as ministers men who, with a very moderate equipment of knowledge, are nevertheless attractively vigorous in speech. There is a story told of that eminent preacher and writer, the late Dr. Edward Everett Hale, which is suggestive in this connection. "A man of very ardent spirit," we read, "but of very ungrammatical habit," made a stirring speech at a Boston Whit-week meeting. Dr. Hale, addressing the secretary of the Association, said: "Mr. Lowe, if you can get twenty men who will speak as bad English as that, we can take the country!" Well, without insisting too much on the badness of the English, have there not been critics on this side of the Atlantic, also, who could willingly have surrendered much of the dignity and culture of our average preacher if he could only be got to say something really helpful and "stirring"?

No doubt, also, the special circumstances of recent years have assisted in no small degree to alter the demands made upon our preachers. It is not that less is desired, but different. Great numbers of men have in these years come into close contact with the squalid realities of war, and multitudes of the more thoughtful of the population have been and are profoundly troubled by the experiences of this post-war period. Faced by facts in so stern and ugly a shape, these people are naturally impatient under any but the most practical kind of preaching. In another age, it may be, there would be a fitting opportunity to display the graces of a cultured eloquence, to balance one subtle argument against

another, and to pursue minute inquiries respecting bygone generations ; but " just now " (we can readily imagine someone saying) " the times are too urgent to dally with art or to allow of abstract researches ; and we prefer any rough tool that will, as they say, ' get things done,' to one that may be more polished but is distinctly less effective."

And, not to weary you with multiplying considerations that seem to tell with no slight force against the Scholarly Tradition of the ministry, I must at least mention one more that comes home to some of us with peculiar point. Among the young men of " ardent spirit " who are invited to share the College studies, and who may have actually entered upon them, there are no doubt some still, as there have been in the past, who are conscious of an eager impulse—we might say, of a glowing passion—to be out at the work to which they have sincerely consecrated their lives. The prophetic fire burns within them ; the sight of so many souls drifting in the dangerous rapids of the modern world is nothing short of any agony to the youth. He longs, God helping him, to be " about his Father's business," and to stretch out a brotherly hand to these struggling brethren of his. Why this tedious delay ? Why all these studies and drillings in so many fields—historical, philosophical, linguistic, documentary—which seem so hopelessly remote from the actualities of that world of anxious and suffering men and women, and of hapless children being early perverted in mind as in body ? To answer such an eager spirit and to reconcile it with patient continuance in the path marked out, the Scholarly Tradition which we are here to uphold and transmit should have something reasonable and convincing to say for itself. What does it say ?

II.

The Defence.

In the first place the Tradition reminds us that the ministry is a *stated profession*—not the only one, of course, but as truly a profession as any other to which a man may dedicate his powers. To regard it as in any degree a casual employment is not merely to impair its dignity, but tends (I believe) to lessen seriously its efficiency as an uplifting agency in the world. Our own attitude in regard to " entering holy orders " is very different, of course,

from that of the sacerdotal churches ; but I think we should be justified in claiming that in essentials, apart from the mere externals (as we deem them) of official ordination, our ministry, as such, is equally with all other true "ministries," a "vocation," with a special function calling for special qualifications. All other professions have their special functions and qualifications likewise, as, for example, those of the law, medicine, or the navy. Now, our students are preparing for the "ministry of religion"; that is, while all men should be religious, these special men are to be helpers to that end—just as, we may suppose, all men should aim to be healthy, but the medical profession is to help them in this laudable aim. Presumably, also, lawyers are set apart so as to render expert assistance in keeping one's ways lawful and right—at least, let us hope so. But the point I wish to emphasize is, that in every profession there is a certain quality of mind regarded as normal to that profession; the scientific temper distinguishes the doctor, the legal mind the lawyer; and the current phrase, "an officer and a gentleman," surely indicates something beside technical ability, a certain gallantry, universally expected of a man holding rank in the King's service. And, unless I am much mistaken, this universal expectancy, this accepted standard or norm of what any member of the several professions should be in his own person adds very much to the effect of his words and actions as he plays his special part in human society. It is not the particular individual, A. B. alone, who is regarded as speaking or doing thus and not otherwise, but a "doctor" or a "lawyer," with all the indefinite but very real and operative momentum accruing from the tradition of his vocation.

Now it may be candidly admitted that there have probably been more frequent lapses from standard in the ministerial profession (I refer to the intellectual side) than in those other professions where the initiation is more rigorously exacted; but that there does exist an ordinary expectation in the case of the minister of religion, not only as to his moral principle and reverent temperament, but also as to "culture" in a wide sense, seems to me undeniable. He should be as much of a Scholar as possible, and should certainly have a Scholarly Mind. I have referred to the seventy years or so of the life of our College. A similar period beyond our beginnings would take us back to the foundation of Manchester College, and to the address given on September 14,

1786, by the Rev. Thomas Barnes, D.D., the celebrated minister at that time of Cross Street Chapel. In that address are two or three sentences which appear to me as apt to-day as ever they were : " Piety alone, however sincere, however fervent, will not insure to a Minister respectability or success. It must be regulated and assisted by knowledge ; and it will be fashioned as to its complexion and form in no small degree by the kind and extent of that knowledge with which it is attended. Let us not depise well-meaning ignorance. Let us do honour to the rude but honest effusions of a sincere heart. But in the Public Teacher of Religion you justly expect a furniture, a cultivation of mind sufficient to add lustre to his other treasures, and to qualify him to be not only a burning but a shining light in the sanctuary of God." *We*, perhaps, should be careful not to forget in our day the " burning " as well as the " shining," but certainly I believe the experience of more than a century since the days of Dr. Barnes leaves his judgment on the subject unimpaired. The preacher in our pulpits is expected to have a mental " furniture " ; he is credited, and as a rule justly, with something more than fervent feelings and benevolent intentions. The very fact that it is a Unitarian or Liberal Christian pulpit in which he stands will remind him, if it be necessary, that they who are there aspire to " love God with all their mind " as well as with all their other powers. Obviously no man who is ignorant of the grave cleavages between the different types of Christian thought can be rightly considered in place there ; and, need I say, to have an adequate knowledge of these types of thought involves much more than a hasty and ill-digested absorption of cut-and-dried statements of belief, on the one side or the other.

Thus, to fit oneself for the post of teacher and leader of thought in such communities as ours, there are obvious needs of wide information, ranging over the successive changes of Christianity back to the earliest times ; and is it not equally clear that to understand those earliest times themselves there must be a sound knowledge of what went before and what lay around the incipient Church ? But how can such sound knowledge be acquired without a close study of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, alike as to their contents and their literary forms, and, on the other hand, a reasonable acquaintance with the classical peoples of Greece and Rome, and their thought and culture ? Is it not, too, just as evident that to enable a man in our day to speak with authority as to the rightful

claims of his own form of faith he should have a fair grasp of others which compete with it for the acceptance of the rising generation? Only when a juryman has truly examined the facts of the case is his verdict really worth anything; and if our preacher is to be a helper indeed he must surely endeavour to act honestly by his hearers in these great matters.

III.

The Scholarly Mind.

But so doing he has confessedly a big task before him. When one surveys it all—the vast and crowded page of the past, and the subtle problems of thought and life to-day—he might indeed be dismayed and ask, “Who can possibly be sufficient for these things?” Even the fullest College course, how far can it go to supply what is needed, not to say desirable? Well, an answer to such queries, and I hope a satisfactory answer, may be found in the following considerations. You may have noticed that I have spoken of the Scholarly Mind as well as of Scholarship; the distinction is fully intended. Of course the two things are closely allied, and it may not be easy to conceive one without the other; and yet it is not very difficult to observe that, as regards learning, one may have a great deal of it and yet not be truly master of it—just as an amateur conductor may find himself with an orchestra of many different instruments before him but not himself be musician enough to direct them to great ends. Precisely how little a man may know and yet be fairly credited with having the scholarly type of mind I do not propose now to explore; but for our mutual comfort and encouragement we may venture on the thought that here, as in other matters, much wisdom may be developed in using a little well. To learn to use our learning well, be it little or much, is to be acquiring the Scholarly Mind; and, as it seems to me, such acquisition will always be easier and more vitalizing in effect when the learner puts himself into favourable personal contact with those who already possess the secret. I put the stress on men rather than on their books, and on the men that are in and behind the books. Grammars and lexicons, by themselves, will never impart the Scholarly Mind; but the living grammarian may, if by any means we can get at him.

For the Scholarly Mind is a thing of constructive life, not of mere knack and memory. It is rooted, like so much other wisdom—indeed, all wisdom—in the soil of reverence, and it flowers in admiration and something closely akin to love. The true Scholar not only can quote the fact but can duly weigh it while he quotes ; he is an adept at proportion, and ranges each new discovery along with former knowledge, for he knows that the true only becomes truth by becoming organic. The Scholarly Mind is one pre-eminently imbued with the virtue, by no means universal, of intellectual honesty ; it scorns slipshod statements and abhors indolent inaccuracy. To find out just how things were, and are, and how related, is to him who possesses such a mind a steadfast anchorage in the drift and confusion of this world's hearsays, suppositions, artistic fictions, and downright lies. He will not disdain at times the close scrutiny of a jot or a tittle, for he is Hebraist enough to know the occasional importance of such seeming trifles ; at the same time he, and only such as he, is a safe judge of relative values and can distinguish the significant from the negligible. The one thing his soul supremely hateth is the bearing of false witness, whether explicit, implicit, or in mere sloppiness. Like the ancient Levite he scrupulously avoids defilement ; but the uncleannesses shunned by the Scholarly Mind are the stains of misleading and of being misled.

You see I have primarily insisted on the ethical side of this matter, and I hope wisely so. For healthful vigour of mind as of body goes with living dutifully, and it is ever the path that is straitened and the narrow gate that lead unto the life that is life indeed. Even were this not so clear, there are doubtless some noble spirits who in sheer loyalty to what is right, however austere its aspect, would pursue the excellent for its own sake. Let not any such too severely judge those of us who hold fast the promises, and who confessedly look to the advantages, gains, and even the pleasures that are the fruit of the scholarly life. Although the scholar is not the prophet, yet (says John Hamilton Thom) " the prophetic spirit will by means of scholarship, attain to wider surveys and speak with richer powers." Surely it will, if only, while becoming more and more learned, it still remains " prophetic " and avoids the dulness and insipidity of mere learnedness. To suppose otherwise is to think the average man incapable of appreciating great ideas and noble forms, which he certainly is not. The ex-

perience of the greatest preachers is all in a line with that of Phillips Brooks, whose advice is : " Give them the very best and truest that you know. For one minister who preaches ' over people's heads ' there are twenty whose preaching goes wandering about under men's feet." For my own part I get an agreeable reassurance about average human nature from the remark of the rustic neighbour to whom Emerson lent a book of Plato. The good man returned the volume by and by, well pleased, saying that he found the Greek had anticipated many of his own private thoughts ! The scholarly speaker, provided always that he is, personally, at least as much of a man as the unscholarly utterer of " bad English," need never hesitate to trust his audience ; his superior claims to attention will be instinctively felt by quite ordinary people, in a way that is impossible to the ignorant or specious orator who, as they soon discover and bluntly say, " does not know what he is talking about."

But it is not only becoming an informed and therefore an informing preacher that results from the scholarly habit. If a man so far lives personally as one who is, however modestly, at least truly in the scholarly line, linking generation to generation, he cannot fail to be mentally and spiritually quickened by contact with those great and originating minds ; and he need not fear in the least that his own " originality " will be lessened if he discovers again and again, like Emerson's rustic philosopher, that someone has " been there " before him. Rather he may be grateful for the assurance that he is evidently not using his brain in vain ; and, for the rest, reflect that any so called " originality " that is outside the orbit of the wisest thinking and the deepest feeling of the ages is probably of little value to its possessor and none at all to mankind in general. And, if we may speak of the *pleasures* of the scholar, there are - it seems to me - few satisfactions so pure and perennially fresh (to say nothing of cheapness) as those that arise in the communions of one's mind with those of the men of genius and greatness of soul, whose thoughts live for ever in poem, and drama, and history, as well as in the more formally philosophical treatises and distinctly religious books of antiquity.

Shall we not add that there is a peculiar restorative, a real recreation in the pursuit of study long after one has passed the ordinary student period ? Dr. Crosskey, who was one of the busiest ministers we ever had, busied in the affairs of a large and

exacting congregation, but also in public affairs—and moreover a scientist frequently engaged in close investigations and keen discussions—significantly declared that without maintaining the intellectual exercises set up as habitual in his student days he could not have gone on. It was not simply that the close commerce with books and the exercise of his critical faculties enabled him (as he says) to “supply the waste,” to pour in what he must be more or less constantly pouring out in sermons and writings, but that (I quote his own words): “the quietness, and peace, and strength given by study are essential for a busy man, if he would keep his head clear, and fresh, and healthful for his daily work.”

IV.

Our High Trust

Thus in many ways, may I not say, the Scholarly Tradition is amply justified; and we find it is no mere hobby that we are dealing with, a thing that one minister may favour if he likes, and another not; in the deepest sense it is an indispensable “paying proposition,” to neglect which is to impair the minister’s effectiveness, to lessen his higher joys, and to betray a trust which has been handed down to us all as stewards. How solemn and important this trust may prove will be realized afresh if we give heed to some deeply menacing signs of the times in which we live. In this year’s Romanes Lecture, Professor John Burnet, of St. Andrew’s, stated his deliberate conviction that “the young men of to-day were absolutely and relatively more ignorant than those of 40 years ago, and, what was worse, they had less curiosity and intellectual independence.” Observe, in passing, that the alertness and mental virility of these young men are said to have decreased with the range of their knowledge; but the main point is as to the fact, which I fear cannot be disputed, that a change for the worse has in many quarters come over the tastes and ambitions of many of the rising generation. Mid-Victorian earnestness and assiduity are out of fashion with them; and there is a vast mass of semi-literates in this country who have got just enough reading power to be gullible by the modern newspaper, and who are a source of gravest peril alike in politics and religion. How much farther this decadence

may proceed it would be rash to prophesy ; but evidently, in such a situation, the utmost the minister can do—as one most of all men interested in the elevation of the manhood of our race, mentally and spiritually as well as physically—is demanded of him. And if, indeed, those seers are to be heeded who have visions of world-catastrophe not remotely ahead, visions of a civilization shattered far beyond the worst that happened to ancient Babylonia, Egypt, or Rome—if the really Dark Ages are still before our afflicted race—what hope can there be of a great and finally triumphant *Renaissance* save in those sacred treasures and traditions of knowledge, beauty, wisdom, and devout feeling which such men as we, among the rest, are set to guard ? *

May it be ours to be found faithful stewards of so high a trust. Not many of us may be able, perhaps, to add greatly to those precious stores of truth which are the only permanent riches that earth can boast ; we may not even be ranked very high in the noble army of interpreters and mediators of the thoughts of the world's greatest thinkers, though some good service in that kind we must all aspire to render. But this, at least, we may resolve to do—to keep in step with the leaders by maintaining our own studious habits ; to preserve the stimulating fellowship of kindred spirits, not only in our own circle or even in our own land—for it may be that the broad-minded Scholars of the world will yet render peculiar and invaluable service to peace and the brotherhood of the world ; to recall from time to time the high lineage, intellectually, from which we are sprung ; and, while we strive to be our best as inspiring and life-giving preachers, to uphold and even to raise still higher, the standard of learning, and of learning's best wisdom, among us.

* The Visitor here interposed a reference to the late Rev. Edward Morgan, an alumnus of the College, whose repute in his community was that of a scholarly minister.



